

# Virginia Gardening

*with Jim May*

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## **Growing and Managing the Old-fashioned Wisteria Vine**

**By Jim May**

It seems every old farmhouse has a wisteria vine twisting its way along a porch trellis. Wisterias are vigorous, twining vines widely used in the landscape. They are greatly valued for their large, pendulous flower clusters that occur in the spring. This member of the pea family has flowers that may be white, pink, lilac-blue, bluish-purple or purple in color. The fruit is a long, green flattened pod.

One of the most frustrating things about growing wisteria is the plants grown from seed remain in a long juvenile stage and often do not bloom for 10 to 15 years or longer. Plants that are grafted, and plants grown from cuttings or layered from a flowering plant will usually begin flowering earlier than seedlings.

The genus *Wisteria* includes ten species of deciduous climbing vines: two native to the southern United States (*W. frutescens* and *W. macrostachys*) and the others native to eastern Asia. Chinese wisteria (*W. sinensis*), and Japanese wisteria (*W. floribunda*) are typically grown in home gardens. The Chinese wisteria is more popular due to its flowering habit. It grows to a height of 25 feet or more and has flower clusters from six inches to a foot in length that open before the foliage has expanded. Individual flowers in the clusters open all at once for a very showy display. Flowers are violet-blue and slightly fragrant. Plants are most showy from early to mid-May in most seasons. There are several colorful cultivars, including white and dark purple.

Japanese Wisteria grows to a height of 25 feet or more and has violet-blue, fragrant flowers that bloom as the foliage is expanding. Individual flowers open gradually from the base of the cluster to the tip. Clusters can be 12 to 18 inches in length and are effective in late May in most seasons. There are numerous cultivars of Japanese Wisteria with various flower colors including white, pink and purple.

Wisterias climb best on wires, trellises, arbors and pergolas. They can be grown on solid, vertical surfaces if proper supports are provided, such as rows of wire attached four to six inches from the wall. Use sturdy, durable materials such as galvanized wire, tubing or wood. Copper or aluminum wire or tubing is preferred over other metals since these do not rust. Use pressure-treated wood for arbors and pergolas. Be careful planting wisteria where the stems can invade and clog building gutters.

Some annual pruning is required to maintain plant quality; it is not advisable to allow the vine to grow randomly and take over surrounding plants and structures. This strong twining vine can girdle and kill small trees if not kept in bounds. Pruning will help reduce the vigor of the vine and promote flowering.

To train new plants on a wire trellis or an arbor, select a vigorous, upright stem to serve as the main leader and attach this to the support. Remove other side shoots. As the main leader grows, it will develop side branches that will then produce more shoots and the flower buds. Continue to train the main leader upward and the new side branches as needed to form a framework to fit the allotted space (allow about 18 inches between side branches). Pinch off the main leader when it reaches the desired height.

Annual maintenance includes allowing only one strong leader to develop from the end of each main framework branch. Don't prune this leader; instead attach it to the support and cut off the ends of all new side shoots that develop just beyond the sixth or seventh leaf. New shoots will form as a result of these cuts. As they do, cut them back as soon as only one or two leaves develop.

Wisteria can also be grown as a single trunk standard or a tree-form. To accomplish this, the plant must be staked in an upright position. When it has reached four to five feet in height its top is cut off. Side shoots are allowed to develop on the upper part, but are continually removed from the lower stem. Side shoots are pruned each winter to six inches to a foot in length until the top is as large as desired.

The biggest frustration gardeners face when growing wisteria is that plants fail to bloom as expected. Start with grafted plants or those produced from cuttings rather than those grown from seed. Flower buds can be killed in harsh winters. Wisterias require at least six hours of direct sunlight daily. Do not apply nitrogen fertilizer as this stimulates vegetative growth and delays flowering.

If you have a plant that has failed to bloom, try root-pruning this fall after the foliage has dropped off. Use a spade to cut vertically into the soil about 18 inches deep and about four feet from the main trunk, all around the vine. Root pruning can stimulate young plants to bloom or restore blooming on older plants. Next winter prune the plant by cutting back last summer's shoots to one half to two thirds their length. Early next spring apply a couple handfuls of super phosphate (0-20-0) fertilizer around the base of the plant. Mulch and water well.

Be diligent with your Wisteria. The blooms are worth the effort and this plant will be around long enough for your grandchildren to enjoy.

Virginia Gardening with Jim May is brought to you by the Virginia Green Industry Council and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.